

# Editorial

## Service-learning: Social groupwork in action

Recently, one of the Co-Editors was reviewing the themes of the Groupwork International Symposium over the past decade and noticed that Detroit 2004 was entitled *Reaching Across Boundaries*, the theme of this special edition of Groupwork could be *Reaching Across Disciplines*.

Since 1985, Campus Compact, the national coalition of college and university presidents, dedicated to promoting community engagement and service-learning, has grown from three institutions to over 1,100 representing more than a quarter of all higher education institutions. The passion that fueled service-learning's growth came from fervor among its proponents that the practice could link to the core work of colleges and universities and while transforming learning, educating for democracy, and encouraging research to better understand and improve the world. Service-learning incorporates community practice and groupwork into the curriculum, providing students' with real-world learning experiences that enhance their academic learning while delivering a tangible benefit for the community. Indeed, these concepts resonate with what Doel and Sawdon (1999, pp.13-15) state about the attraction of groupwork. They assert that there are numerous benefits of groupwork, these being its integrating experience, humanness, effective environment, equality, help, support, solutions, strategies, variety, fun, sense of belonging, and community; or, as defined by McDermott:

Groups are a bounded social experience which include:

- *An objective element*: it exists in time and space and is usually visible and tangible;
- *A subjective element*, which is felt, creates and co-constructed in the minds, bodies and intellects of participants. (McDermott, 2002,p.32).

Over the past decade, many members of the University of Southern Maine have incorporated social groupwork and service-learning into their curriculum. Yet, for a number of years these attempts were conducted in isolation, or at least not in any coordinated fashion. However, in 2009, the University held its first Service-Learning Symposium. It was at that point that there was a realization by faculty that they were not undertaking this practice alone and that many faculty across many disciplines had been attempting to incorporate this service-learning pedagogy into their teaching.

At a service learning workshop in May of 2011, a faculty member asked about what opportunities were available for faculty to publish their work. Listening to this individual speak so passionately about the work he was undertaking immediately resonated with one of the editors of this special edition. He was talking about social groupwork in action. Based on this impassioned presentation and hearing other participants describing their work with equal enthusiasm led us to contacting Tim Kelly and Jennie Fleming, the co-editors of *Groupwork*. They recommended writing a proposal to their editorial board. Much to our delight, this proposal was supported by the editorial board at its summer meeting of 2011.

Through the support of Andrea Mc Call Thompson and Alicia Samson from the Office of Community Service-Learning, at the University of Southern Maine, we put out a call at USM for papers. We were delighted with the response we received from the faculty. What was even more impressive were the numerous disciplines that responded: Art, Athletic Training, Communication, Criminology, Environmental Science, Exercise, Health & Sport Science, Muskie School of Public Service, Nursing, Political Science, Recreational Therapy and Social Work.

Even more encouraging was that all of the contributors were using *Groupwork*. *Groupwork* was infused through the educational pedagogy of service-learning. Indeed, we would assert that service learning is Social Groupwork 'in action.' As we reviewed the submissions, we observed how social groupwork had benefits for many constituents. First, it took the student outside of the classroom setting. Second, it brought the local and international community into contact with the University. Third, and perhaps most significant, it turned the traditional educational paradigm on its head because the instructor was no longer

the 'expert,' but rather the members of community were the givers and providers of knowledge. We read about how service-learning through social groupwork is allowing students to make 'meaningful' connections with local, national and international communities. Students were able to quickly apply theoretical knowledge in meaningful and significant ways. The concepts they are studying both abstract and theoretical have practical and meaningful implications.

## **The Contributors**

Alicia Sampson and Paul Johnson's Introduction, 'The Theoretical Underpinnings and Educational/Community Benefits of Service Learning and Groupwork', examines the theoretical underpinning of service learning and other relevant pedagogies which together enhance and enrich the learning opportunities for students. They assert that this modality enriches the academic experiences of students and faculty and benefits not only the university community but also the wider community. The introduction also makes the point that service-learning is *social groupwork* in action, and that many of the attributes of groupwork described by Doel and Sawson such as sense of belonging, support, equality and community, are emphasized.

In the article by David Jones, '*The Professional Advancement of Recreation Therapy through Groupwork and Service-learning*', he asserts that career training and involving students in service to the greater community should not be viewed as distinct and juxtaposed pedagogies. Rather, through systematic curriculum development that includes groupwork fundamentals, experiential-learning activities, and service-learning experiences, these two educational approaches can be quite complimentary and provide students with a deeper understanding of practice-based knowledge, as well as broader based contextual factors. Again, in David's paper, one is struck by the numerous groupwork benefits that not only the students gained from these activities but also the community, and the sense of connectedness and humanness that was established, also his astute observations of the process resonate with McDermott's definition.

Ben Townes' and Anne Keith's paper, 'Merging Athletic Training and Nursing Clinical Education: An Interdisciplinary, International Service-

Learning Model', makes the compelling argument that by combining nursing and athletic training clinical experiences, one can better prepare the health care student for future team work with other disciplines and a diverse patient population. Through international service-learning courses, faculty can enhance the undergraduate student experience while also serving those most in need. Athletic Training and Nursing students at the University of Southern Maine blend together as an interdisciplinary group to participate in a community based health care initiative to rural citizens in the Dominican Republic. What is so wonderful about this experience is that students get to go out of the country; they learn so much from the communities they are working in that indeed all of the benefits of groupwork that Doel and Sawson allude to are captured in this International experience.

Lynn Kuzma's paper 'Developing Global Citizenship: Service Learning and Groupwork in an Undergraduate Seminar', addresses her attempts to develop global citizenship through a service-learning experience that placed undergraduate students in community organizations serving refugee populations. The paper begins with a discussion of the importance of civic engagement in higher education and how service learning, as a pedagogical methodology, advances the goals of civic engagement and community building. She then discusses how groupwork involving service providers and refugees led to an increased civic awareness and transformation of student attitudes towards diverse community groups. What is so wonderful about Lynn's paper is that working at a local level, in one's own community, the students were exposed to such traumatic events and gained a deep appreciation of the numerous obstacles that many forced refugees have encountered in coming to the United States, they were also able to gain a sense of humanness from this experience and as stated in the students personal accounts a sense of connectedness.

Sandy Wachholz and Sam Merrill's paper, 'Teaching Sustainability Through Service Learning: Lessons from the Maine Watershed Project', provides three examples of service-learning projects carried out by faculty who have attended the Maine Watershed Project, a 'greening the curriculum' workshop that is designed to encourage faculty in all disciplines to address environmental sustainability issues in their teaching. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with these faculty members, they highlight how they understand and teach sustainability

through groupwork and service-learning by examining challenges tied to applying this pedagogical approach. They also explore how faculty and students' experiences with groupwork and service-learning increased their sense of connection to local communities, fostered innovation in the classroom, and developed hope-based learning through educational experiences designed to leave students feeling inspired, motivated, and hopeful. Again, what Sandy and Sam demonstrate so wonderfully is the humanness of the entire project and the fact that the project had some tangible benefits.

Rob Sanford's paper, 'Using Team Service-Learning Projects in Environmental Science', provides the rationale and means used to guide students in developing, presenting, and assessing civic engagement projects that involve groupwork. Different environmental courses are summarized with descriptions of group products, evaluation schemes for grading, and student feedback. Team learning promotes creative, dynamic responses to community opportunities. The results enhance student performance and skills in addition to benefitting the community. What is so profound about Rob's paper is his willingness to look at himself in this process and see his role as not the teacher but the learner; again this is one of the wonderful benefits of groupwork as it allows one to take off the role and expectation of expert and become a member.

## **Conclusion**

What is significant about these papers is that groupwork is the vehicle utilized in each case. An impressive number of disciplines are applying groupwork to enhance the learning of their students. The editors of this special edition would assert that by embracing the concepts of service-learning and engaging in partnerships with local, national, and international communities, these courses have not only enriched the learning of the students but have made the communities and the University come into contact with an integral part of the learning.

The students' own testimonies provide compelling evidence that they found social groupwork meaningful, and purposeful. Many of them talk about wanting to continue working with a particular population or in a particular field. The editors recognize that one of the goals of

higher education is to develop civic minded and socially responsible students. It would appear that social groupwork in action, through service learning is having this result.

To all the faculty that are embracing social groupwork through service learning, thank you. For those who are considering this modality, Why not incorporate it into your teaching repertoire?

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## References

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